

UNDERCOVER

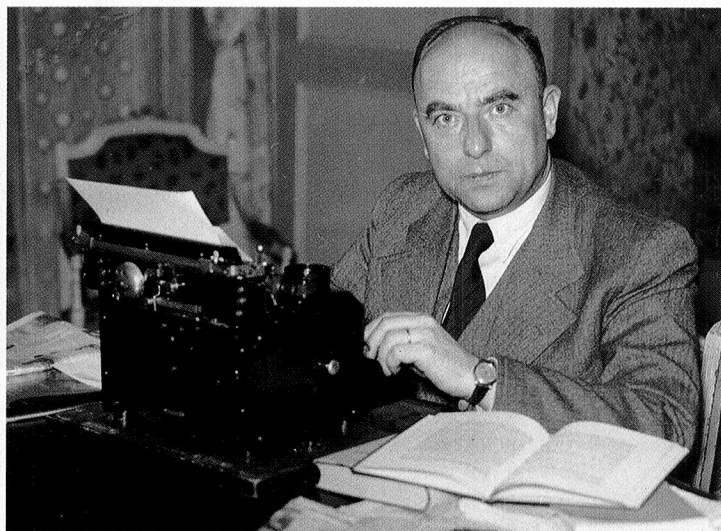
BY GRAHAM A. MACDONALD

The Führer's Nazi Critic

ON THE SECOND DAY of October, 1940, the American ocean liner *Excambion* departed from Lisbon for New York City. The ship made an unscheduled anchorage off the coast of the British colony of Bermuda, and in short order a police launch was making its way out to the ship.

A decorated veteran of World War I, Strasser came from an industrious middle-class family in central Bavaria, one in which ideas of national loyalty and Roman Catholicism were mixed with notions of public service. Following a brief stint as an anti-Communist street fighter

ideological focus for worker interests in the party, particularly in the more industrialized areas of northern Germany. With Joseph Goebbels, they also published the party's in-house organ, the *National Socialist Letter*, which provided a regular forum for contending ideas.



FAR LEFT: BETTMANN/CORBIS; LEFT: HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

A prolific writer, Otto Strasser first learned his trade as a member of the Nazi Party. Disenchanted with Adolf Hitler, the avowed National Socialist fled to Canada one step ahead of the Gestapo. In exile he established the Free German Movement. When he was allowed to return to Germany in the mid-1950s, he started up a new political party. The organizing meeting (left) of the German Social Union in 1956 was marred by protests featuring flying fists and tossed chairs.

The officers removed one passenger, a man carrying a Swedish passport issued to one Otto Bostroem, and escorted him back to the island. That man was, in fact, Otto Strasser, a prominent member of the Nazi Party between 1925 and 1930. A thorn in Adolf Hitler's side during the 1930s, and with the Gestapo on his heels, Strasser had been rescued for "humanitarian reasons" and because of his potential use to the Allies. Strasser remained in Bermuda for several months before being transported to the Port of St. John, New Brunswick, in early April 1941. Just how did an avowed Nazi find himself escorted to safety in Canada in the midst of war?

in the chaos after the armistice, Strasser eventually went to school and studied economics and law. He remained on the sidelines of politics. Increasingly disenchanted with the German Socialist Party, Strasser eventually joined the reconstituted Nazi Party in spring 1925 at the instigation of his brother Gregor. The latter already enjoyed something of a reputation, having been implicated in Hitler's unsuccessful "Beer Hall Putsch" of November 1923. When Otto joined the party, he began working in the new family-owned Kampfverlag newspapers: "The Struggle Publishing House" of Berlin. The brothers soon became the

The efforts of the Strassers to redirect the party to the left had only limited success. Hitler's view of National Socialism came to predominate, and he eventually drew Goebbels firmly into his camp. Otto and his associates continued their prolific pamphleteering and could not be totally ignored by Hitler or those close to him. As a reward for his loyalty, and perhaps to serve as a counterbalance to the efforts of his former associates, Goebbels was made *Gauleiter* of "Red Berlin" in November 1926, and the following year he founded *Der Angriff*, which competed directly with the Strasser papers. Gregor, so vital to the party for his organizing abilities,

also started to side with Hitler, but his brother Otto did not.

Otto opposed Hitler's attempts to gain party backing from industrialists and other monied interests. He offered his "Fourteen Theses of the German Revolution" in 1929, as a revision to the original "Twenty-five Points" of the Nazi program. These theses emphasized corporate state ideals, nationalization of resources and took a somewhat less aggressive and more internationalist tone, but retained racial aspects. During heated meetings in the spring of 1930, Hitler accused Otto and his associates of being "parlor Bolsheviks" and "political boy scouts." Unresolved differences over policy and the cult of leadership forming around Hitler led Otto to dramatically announce in the summer that "the Socialists are leaving the party." This rupture was significant, for while Nazi fortunes had been improving, there were still no clear signs that the Nazis would ever attain power.

Strasser now formed his own movement, the Fighting Group of National Revolutionary Socialists, soon repackaged as *Die Schwarz Front* (The Black Front). The membership consisted of other deviant Nazis, assorted "National Bolsheviks" and people external to the party disenchanted with Hitler's vaulting ambition. Even before he had left the party, Strasser

had composed preliminary versions of what would be his main theoretical work, *The Construction of German Socialism*, published in 1932.

After Hitler's appointment as chancellor on January 30, 1933, the Black Front was soon banned, forcing Strasser to take his movement underground and into exile in Prague. The Black Front, certainly never large, quickly declined, many members ending up in Hitler's concentration camps or killed in his notorious "Night of the Long Knives" on June 30, 1934. Gregor Strasser was one of those murdered that night.

That 1934 blood purge became the central motivating event in Otto Strasser's life. His *The German Bartholomews Night*, published in 1935, provides extraordinary detail on how the event unfolded and on its victims.

With the impending doom of Czechoslovakia in 1938, Strasser suspended publication of his micronewspaper, *Die Deutsche Revolution*, and moved to Switzerland. On November 8, 1939, when a bomb exploded in Munich's Bürgerbräukeller, during old-guard celebrations of the 1923 putsch, the act was attributed by the Nazi leadership to Strasser agents. Swiss authorities were put under pressure to extradite Strasser. Given advance notice, Strasser fled to Paris, where his biographer, the volatile

former London *Times* correspondent Douglas Reed, located him in the spring of 1940. Strasser's most famous book, *Hitler and I*, was just being published in a French edition, giving Strasser much-needed currency. In mid-May, even before German troops had entered Paris, Strasser was briefly interned in a concentration camp with other German nationals, but he escaped to Portugal. When Strasser was quite at the end of his rope, he was plucked out of Lisbon by British intelligence agents.

News of the arrival of the much-harassed Strasser at the Port of St. John, New Brunswick, received mixed reviews. During his time in Bermuda Strasser had been busy putting in place the framework for what he hoped would become the basis of a German government-in-exile. The vehicle to bring this about he called the Free German Movement (FGM). Even before stepping onto Canadian soil he had made overtures to certain prominent German exiles encouraging their participation, but with little success.

Strasser was at first given a fair bit of leeway by authorities, in keeping with the British Foreign Office view that he might be of use to the war effort. His mail was, however, carefully monitored, enabling British officials to gain a view of his contacts in America and Europe and to gauge



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the feeble progress made by the Free German Movement.

Through the facilities of Reed's publisher, Jonathan Cape Ltd., Strasser's organization was given a patina of respectability by means of Cape's corporate mailing address in Toronto and elsewhere. Various government officers did, in fact, approach Strasser, then living in Montreal. He was interviewed by, among others, H. Montgomery Hyde of British intelligence and Walter C. Langer, the psychologist attached to William "Wild Bill" Donovan's newly formed Office of Strategic Services. Langer derived a good deal from Strasser, incorporating it into his confidential profile of Hitler, published much later as *The Mind of Adolph Hitler*.

Strasser's propagandizing on behalf of the FGM took many forms and sometimes surfaced in dreadful booklets such as *The Gangsters Around Hitler* or *Hitler's Shadow Over South America*. The latter sought respectability by including under the same cover a piece by Douglas Fairbanks Jr., then close to Donovan and serving as vice chairman of the Committee to Defend America. It is doubtful, however, if Fairbanks ever met Strasser or even knew of this publication. Books were appearing steadily, including *History in my Time*, *The Prussian Eagle Over Germany* and the English edition of *Hitler and I*, along with Reed's first biography, *Nemesis*?

By spring 1942, attitudes toward Strasser among the Allies were changing, primarily because of the Soviet Union's entry into the war. Strasser's consistent view that Stalinism was no better than Hitlerism was no longer acceptable. He was officially interviewed by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and asked to curtail his publishing activities, a request which did not sit well with Strasser, who counter-claimed that he needed to publish for financial reasons. That argument was not accepted by Canadian authorities, who retorted that there were other forms of employment open to him.

In mid-1942, Strasser moved to the Bridgetown area of Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley and resided on the farm of a former Prague acquaintance, Adolph Schmidt. He maintained a severely censored correspondence, made a few new contacts in maritime Canada and refined his theories with a view to a triumphant return to postwar Germany. His main achievement in the next three years was a revision of his earlier book on socialism, which he renamed *Germany's Renewal*.

From his new location he continued to provide Allied personnel with his impression of Germany's leader while at the same time struggling to restore momentum to the FGM and writing on his own particular version of socialism. Until 1947 he

lived and worked, rent-free, on Schmidt's property, keeping an inordinate number of cats as companions, until an old World War I wound flared up in his back. Following a serious back operation in far-away Winnipeg in 1949, he moved from the farm, now sold by the owner, to nearby Paradise, and rented a drafty upper apartment above an 18th-century building that served as the grocery store. He lived simply, with few visitors, but was often joined by his loyal Spanish-Swiss secretary, Margaret de Planellas, who had followed Strasser into exile.

While life in Paradise was lonely for the gregarious Strasser, he did make some acquaintances from whom he evoked some sympathy. Included were a teacher and a businessman in Bridgetown, as well as members of the Hicks family, influential in law, politics and in higher education at Dalhousie University. Such contacts led to invitations to address various groups, including a 1949 meeting of the Canadian Institute of Foreign Affairs in Halifax.

The end of the war in Europe did not seem to slow the pace of his voluminous correspondence. Some of his letters were to old Black Front loyalists in Germany, such as Kurt Sprengel, a book dealer and former comrade, who undertook to reinvent the old organization as the League for German Revival (LGR). Born in 1950,

the LGR saw postwar Germany standing at the center of middle Europe, committed to neither Eastern communism nor Western capitalism. Such a view, however, was out of step with the dynamics of the developing Cold War.

His political views, and opposition by some high Allied representatives to his books, created problems for Strasser as he sought the travel documents necessary for his return to Germany. After much international wrangling, Strasser's associates and his lawyers brought steady pressure on officials, and the ban on his re-entry into Germany was finally broken in 1954 when a West German court found in his favor.

Prior to his departure for Europe the *Montreal Star* reported: "A man who lived out a 14-year exile in a flat above the lone grocery store in tiny Paradise, N.S., confidently predicted here today that within five years he would be leader of one of the world's great powers." On February 19, 1955, *La Sentinelle* ran a photo showing Strasser reunited in Switzerland with his wife, Gertrude, and two children.

Strasser would have been forgiven for putting aside all politics now and taking some time just to live, but his obsession for involvement was still strong. He was soon back in Germany exercising leadership over the rather loose and fractious League for German Revival. Strasser did

not help his own cause when he imprudently, but rather typically, told reporters that his return meant "a victory over the unholy alliance of Hitler, [Henry] Morgenthau and [Konrad] Adenauer" who, he contended, had all worked to keep him out of Germany. A cloak of silence then descended on his activities. H.A. Stephens of the Canadian Embassy, Bonn, reported that "It has been difficult to find out much about Strasser since the newspapers in the Munich area, where he resides, have adhered to an agreement not to mention his name." In June 1956, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* changed its policy, owing to the newsworthy nature of recent events in Bavaria. The initial organizing meeting for Strasser's new party, the German Social Union, was held June 17 in Miltenberg. It was marred by violence. The event recalled post-World War I Munich, when Communists were pitted against Nationalists. Chairs were thrown, fists flew and protesters carried banners offering to send Strasser back to "Kanada." If his followers had helped keep his name and ideas alive in a positive fashion, there were clearly many others who remembered him in quite a different light. Things went downhill from there, and Strasser's party did not even contest in the elections of September 1957. His political career was over. He died in 1974. □

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